New Fiction in Varied Forms

SOULS FOR SALE. By Rupert Hughes. Harper & Bros.

IN this book Mr. Hughes is about one-third novelist and two-thirds that strange animal which we have learned to call a "propagandist." The book is one part story, two parts argumentation or assertion in support of the thesis that the motion picture business is as "pure" as a certain familiar baking powder, that it has already attained nearly to perfection as an art form, and that, in the words of an actor in the story, "the screen is the biggest educational and moral force ever discovered and it hasn't got a fault that is all its own." More specifically we are told by the same actor that it is "too bad we Americans make such a bane of obscenity! A little wholesome smut never hurt anybody."

There is an engaging, naive frankness about the phrase—"wholesome smut." There is, of course, a legitimate, commendable use of even the obscene in art and literature— Rabelais, Shakespeare, Balzac, De Maupassant, Mark Twain, even Thackeray demonstrate that. But it can never be called "smut," which can only mean filth—filth for its own sake. And the introduction of filth for the joy in its filthiness is never artistic. It is simply—filth.

Another subsidiary line of "propaganda" is a statement of the care for the ultra "emancipated" woman. Like Mr. George and a few other men, Mr. Hughes is become more of a "feminist" than any woman has yet dared to be. Indeed, so far as one can judge from their comment, intelligent women find the curious attitude of such feminists a little exasperatingly amusing, but chiefly just stupid in its ignorance of the woman's mind and soul. It is apt to make the assumption, as Mr. Hughes apparently does in the character of his heroine in this book, that all normal, fully alive women have essentially the soul of the prostitute—of the prostitute from choice, whose explanation is that of De Maupassant's Norman peasant—*"parce que je trouv' ca gentil!"* There are such women, just as there are men so obsessed, so sex-ridden that their cosmos contains little else, but it is hardly intelligent to extend their rather abnormal, pathological psychology to embrace all humanity.

This book is a vicious performance—done well enough to attain a wide hearing and accomplish some poisoning. It is vicious because it is bad art, in that, after a cleverly worked out introduction, it becomes clumsy in its construction overloaded with cheap incident, tawdry devices that fall to the level of art of an old time "tank show" and almost incoherent in its action. And Mr. Hughes knows better; when he is inept, awkward in management of his plot he cannot plead inexperience, for he has done some very good work. Possibly he thinks that for the audience at which this is aimed it does not matter. Therein he may be right, because an audience which can regard "The Birth of a Nation" and "Broken Blossoms" as the peak of artistic attainment is not likely to complain of crudity.

It is vicious because it is bad morally—if one may assume that there is such a thing as a moral standard. That may be open to debate, especially as to detail, but probably even Mr. Hughes will admit that it is possible to differentiate, at least along broad lines, between what the sane human being calls right and wrong, good and bad, healthy and unhealthy. From this point of approach the book is vicious because its "feminism" is not only false psychologically but, after one grants it's occasional validity as a protest against silly conventions or ancient taboos and injustices, it remains an absolutely self-centered, debasingly egotistic, narrowly unreal theory of life. Its philosophy is sheer fustian. It is fairly well summarized by the heroine's meditations at the end of the book, when she has attained success as a star, after a long and hectic career, involving several "affairs."

"Life had not plucked her to fling away or merely adorn the buttonhole of some lover. . . . She would make herself the rosiest rose she could. . . . And when she died she would leave her name and face in immortal pictures of deathless motion. . . She had sinned, indeed, her life had been redeemed from futility through her sin at home. She would sin again; but then everybody sinned again and again. . . .

"She wondered who that fellow of her destiny would be—Tom Holby, maybe; Austin Boas, or still another perhaps; or others perhaps, including him or them! In any case he (or they) had better behave and play fair! As for being a mother, let that wait, too. She was going to mother the multitudes and tell them stories to soothe them. . . .

"She had a soul to sell and it was all her own, and she was going to market."

Finally, it is vicious because it is assuredly very bad argument. So far from proving its case it begs the question throughout. It carefully answers the obviously silly criticisms and objections to the screen and to the morale of the moving picture world and entirely ignores the seriously conceived condemnations of those who are unable to follow Mr. Hughes in his ecstasy over the artistic attainments of the photo-play as it is. It needs no 400 page book to demonstrate that official censorship is almost invariably and inevitably stupid, or that any form of art is scarcely to be judged adequately and understandingly by the eighteenth century standards of a narrow-minded country parson. We may heartily agree with Mr. Hughes as to such matters. But the book offers no reply at all to those who find in a great deal of the pictured play no more than utter banality, stupidly uninteresting twaddlings, or raw vulgarity, and who find in a very large percentage of other plays a poison of salacity, a leer, a gloating over suggested or open indecency for its own sake. The real point is that the impulse behind these plays (and the same is true of the spoken drama to some extent) is not at all artistic, not at all a desire to hold a mirror up to nature or to produce beauty. It is no more than a pandering to criticism. Not that it is wholly mercenary; it is sometimes a more subtle thing than that. In her last novel, "The House of Rimmon," Mrs. Watts has made the most acute diagnosis in her analysis of "Delmar" of this subtler element:

"He was so solemnly convinced of the worth and weight of his deliverances than which nothing more stale and shopworn in the way of rhetoric was ever uttered since men first began to deceive themselves with words; he exploited the vulgar and the salacious with so splendid a gesture, serving Art with his whole soul—and never forgetting the box office."

The caustic satire of that summary fits the "movie" even more aptly, and to that Mr. Hughes offers no reply at all other than to advocate "wholesome smut" and object to the eccentricities of a censorship.

As to the charges of immorality among movie actors Mr. Hughes first assures us that Hollywood and Culver City, &c., are, in fact, the concrete realizations of a Spotless Town, and then jumps the other way and tells us that if they are truly naughty they are no worse than any outside community. "Is there any part of the country," an actor asks, "where booze parties are unknown? The dope fiends are not all in Hollywood. Every other town has about the same quota." The argument is not impressive, especially when it glances, for example, at certain cases recently featured in the criminal courts.

Taken simply as a story the first third, or so, of the book is very well done. It is hardly necessary to remind most readers that when he likes Mr. Hughes can tell a story admirably. He starts his heroine as the daughter of a strait-laced parson in a mid-western village. She is pregnant, but her lover is providentially killed. She is aided by a doctor who ships her farther west on the excuse of weak lungs. She manages pretty well and the premature birth of the baby leaves her free to adventure. Her path leads to Hollywood, and after a singular introduction she becomes a screen star. The various intrigues and hectic happenings of her career are too numerous to catalogue. Some are dramatically conceived, though occasionally astonishingly revolting—as in the incident where she and her lover of the moment are held up by a highwayman.

The mistake which Mr. Hughes and other protesters make in their argument [illegible] freedom in art, is the [illegible] assumption that there is anything whatever that can be called "Greek" (as they are fond of calling it) in the nudity they desire.

H. L. PANGBORN.

PETER WHIFFLE: HIS LIFE AND WORKS. By Carl Van Vechten. Alfred A. Knopf.

BEFORE attempting to define the indefinable or to explain this book let us start with the one statement as to which there is likely to be no disagreement; it is one of the best manufactured, the best printed and most ornamentally bound volumes of this season. And, even more noteworthy, the proof of it has been read! Probably one could find some slight misprints, but they do not shriek at you in each chapter as they do in most recent American books.

That much it is safe to say. Beyond that point doubts begin. It is confessedly anomalous; its preface calls it a "sort of loose biographical form, a free fantasia in the manner of a Liszt rhapsody." And, for once, the "blurb" on the jacket is accurate in calling it "a book of sensations and reactions" belonging to "the literature of escape." It is not quite a novel, certainly not an essay, and it is more than a series of episodic sketches. Probably we would best ticket it as an abnormal novel, a semi-biographical study of a type, with the addition of a good deal of gossip, philosophizing, and not a little brilliant description. Beyond all that it contains numerous passing glimpses of a large number of actual notables—a liberal chunk from the "Who's Who" editions, from about 1907 down to date.

It opens with Mr. Van Vechten in Paris, in his happy youth, on May 10, 1907; an admirable chapter—the eternal Paris of youth, much the same as the reviewer remembers it from his happy youth of a day many years before Mr. Van Vechten's. There is—or was—no better place for a young man to be upon any May 10 than that Paris. And whether the war has changed all that or not doubtless there was an eternally enduring quality about that Paris. It lives, somewhere. Some of it lives in Mr. Van Vechten's pages.

Next comes Mary Garden—not that she has anything further to do with the narrative—if there is any narrative—but because she was actually there, and Mr. Van Vechten experienced her. Incidentally we meet Peter Whiffle, and learn that he is going to write a book. He explains:

"What is the book to be about? Why, it is to be about the names of the things I have collected. It is to be about 300 pages," he added triumphantly. . . . "Three hundred pages of color and style and lists, lists of objects, all jumbled artfully. . . . Don't you understand that perfumes and reaping machines are never to be found together in real life? That is art, making a pattern, dragging unfamiliar words and colors and sounds together until they form a pattern, a beautiful pattern."

Peter never wrote that book, nor any of the more subtly conceived later variants of it. But this is it: full of perfumes and reaping machines, and ships and shoes and sealing wax, highly colored sealing wax, and cabbages and kings, and in every case a careful account of the "sensations and reactions" to each object, human or still life, of Mr. Peter Whiffle—or, sometimes even of Mr. Van Vechten, as you please. For the real secret of all that class—sometimes brilliant—youngsters of whom Peter is a sample is that they are, or rather were, intensely and immovably self-centered. The past tense may be used because although not entirely extinct the type which was common enough before the war is rare to-day, having been supplanted by a rather inferior, less lovable variant.

Mr. Van Vechten has caught it exactly. Sometimes one suspects he is guying the part a little, but no—on the whole he takes his Peter quite seriously. Nevertheless there is a sense in which the "mere lay woman" of the book, who complains that "it's just like the last chapter of 'Alice,'" was right. "If I shouted 'Why you're only a pack of cards' you'd all fly up in the air, a lot of flat pasteboards."

But to return to profound and impregnable analysis—the Peter Whiffles of the pre-war period, represented a glorified cult of the Ego. It was an aspiring type that really wanted to do things, to write great books, paint, perpetrate poems, but it was so hedged in by its interest in itself that it never could get outside of that self-made prison. It amounted to a sort of religious fanaticism of self-worship, though of course it used other terms than that. A good many individuals of the breed came out of an environment of dull mediocrity; they had just enough uplift to get themselves out, to realize that they were better than their environment and to aspire, but they could go no further. Hence they became, by adoption, a family of grandnephews to Oscar Wilde and the "slim gilt souls" of the earlier æstheticism. They cavorted into Cubism and discovered *vers libre* in its Fothergill Finch, American variant of the really alive French original. Wilde at least got himself into jail, and left behind some immortal poems. Our American collaterals (who were once known, a little before Mr. Van Vechten's day, as the "pink poet push" in and about Washington Square) never achieved more than aspiration. The top notch of attainment in expression was really the wonderful "Tender Buttons" of Gertrude Stein.

Peter Whiffle is an outline of much of that class and its era, though he is also a little more. After his Paris introduction we get a "flash back," to use the motion picture phrase, and learn that Peter was born in Toledo in 1885, the son of a respectable stodgy bank cashier; that he went through Williams, on compulsion, was imprisoned briefly in the bank but escaped to New York to "live his own life," the ideal of which was based upon doing no work whatever. He served a term with the claque at the opera, but becomes too engrossed in Fremstad's singing to applaud and loses that job. Then he plays the piano in a house of "pretty ladies," and is perfectly happy. But a rich uncle grotesquely leaves him a small fortune, whereupon he buys clothes, gets a haircut, has a bath, a cocktail at the Knickerbocker bar and—

"Then he ate his dinner, consisting of terrapin, roast canvasback duck, an alligator pear and a quart or two of Pontet Canet. It was during the course of this dinner that it occurred to him for the first time in his life that he would become an author. Four days later he sailed for Paris."

Upon his return, in 1913, after an unexplained six years during which we only know that "he lived," he enters upon a revolutionary stage, followed by a parlor Bolshevik era, an "æsthetic saturnalia" and assorted experimentation. Still later we find him indulging in magic, in a veritable Arabian Nights stage setting, just such as Belasco would have bought for an incantation scene. It blows him into the hospital, but also aids him toward a saner mysticism which is his last phase, lasting to his death in 1910.

The whole thing is supremely clever, if sometimes a little smart. But most of its glitter is real enough. It will add to Mr. Van Vechten's record, even more than his "Tiger." By the way, it should be noted that there are exemplary cats here; one an orange gentleman named George Moore, another a lady named George Sand; also a black nightmare who aids in Peter's incantations. And no doubt Mr. Van Vechten will agree that these cats are the sanest people in the book.

HENRY WALKER.

VOCATIONS. By Gerald O'Donovan. Boni & Liveright.

THERE is a medieval quality about the background of this and in many of its people that will drive the reader of our day and of our environment to pinch himself to prove that he is not dreaming back into the thirteenth century in his feeling of the reality of the story. Possibly even some devout Roman Catholics will feel this anachronistic resentment. Yet the thing is real and it is of to-day. In fact, Mr. O'Donovan is above all an unsparing realist; often grimly, sardonically a realist, seeing and describing things as they are down to the minutest detail. Sometimes he strips off a protective covering to get down to the naked reality, even to the bare bones of his people. There is, however, no distortion in the process, no exaggeration. He is always the conscientious artist. . . .

The sharpness of effect book as a whole lies precisely in the intrusion of entirely modern, even futurist ideas, ideals and facts upon this medieval stage. His people are living in two eras at once—in the twentieth as well as the thirteenth century. The result is bizarre, even shocking; but one may not question its fundamental truth or the superficial neatness and accuracy of its detail.

The critic is not entirely clear as to Mr. O'Donovan's chief purpose in this singular book. There is, of course, first of all, the purely artistic aim, the telling of a moving tale, of a large cross section of life—life in its essentials although moving in a narrow and strongly individualized environment, a tiny back water apart from the main stream. The story does not move out of the small town of Drumbawn, in a medieval, Catholic Ireland. The whole plot unfolds in the shadow of the church, and most of it behind the walls of a convent. All but two of the chief characters are priests, nuns or novices, and those two are pious devotees, the father and mother of the two girls who are caught up into a "vocation" and become professed nuns. It is emphatically and always an ecclesiastical affair, but

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